



CAPTivations

Success Stories in Prevention

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Health Education Advisory Committee/Mi Animo Mentoring

In the San Luis Valley four hours south of Denver, young people at first glance may seem ripe for using alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. The valley is isolated, especially in the winter, when heavy snows in the surrounding mountains may make travel to the outside world all but impossible. The population in this beautiful, peaceful rural area – roughly split 50-50 between whites and Hispanics – tends to be poverty stricken. Children are confronted with boredom, with little to do in the scattered valley towns of the six-county valley region.

But the Health Education Advisory Committee, a Colorado Kids Ignore Drugs Initiative (CKID) coalition group, is working to reverse the perceptions and reality of high alcohol and tobacco use, as well as prevent teen pregnancies, violence, and other risky behaviors.

"The Health Education Advisory Committee is a true coalition," said Carla Garcia, project co-director and literary support specialist for the Alamosa school district. "We have people on the committee from mental health fields, social services, law enforcement, public health, and attorneys. Committee members represent the whole gambit of the community."

Garcia and Donna Briones, project co-director and director of project resource development for the Mi Esperanza Youth Prevention Services, San Luis Valley Comprehensive Mental Health Center, jointly applied for the CKID funding in 1998. The initial funding began in August 1999 and ends in July 2002. Fortunately the grant has been extended for an additional year.

The Health Education Advisory Committee started its life in 1994 with a Colorado Trust grant, working with the Rocky Mountain Center for Health Education

and Promotion to implement a comprehensive health education program in the Alamosa school district. The Rocky Mountain Center is a private, non-profit corporation which provides health education programs and inservice training to educators, parents, and other individuals committed to improving health. The CKID grant, however, required the coalition to draw half its program from the community and half from the school.

Briones, who heads up the community component of the CKID program, developed the Mi Animo Mentoring project. This mentor program, developed from the ground up, targets

middle school students, both those who are considered at high risk for becoming involved in substance abuse, violence and teen pregnancy

and other students just wanted an adult mentor in their lives.

"We did the advertising, recruiting, training," Briones points out. "Our goal was to match 50 mentors with young people over three years, and we got 78 matches."

Initially, Briones and the coalition found it difficult to get adults to agree to become mentors. Adults didn't think they had what it took to become a role model for these young teens. Then, Briones said, the coalition switched to a nomination process, asking people to nominate others who they thought might make good mentors. The adults who were nominated to become mentors felt honored that their neighbors recommended them and were more likely to accept the role than if they had been

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asked directly.

"We'd thought one of our biggest challenges would be to find enough men to become mentors," Briones observed. "But our mentors are split 50-50 between males and females." Even with successful recruiting effort and the community acceptance of the mentoring program, Mi Animo still has a waiting list.

Mentors and youth are matched according to interest. It might be a hobby, such as fishing, hiking, or horseback riding, or it might be career interest. Sometimes, the parent might request a particular type of mentor, especially if the parent is a single mother who wants a father figure for her son. Other times, the Mi Animo staff just gets a "intuitive feeling" that a certain mentor and student should be paired.

"We do interviews with the mentors, the kids, and the parents," Briones notes. "It's very comprehensive. And the parents get to meet the mentors. The mentors sometimes become a very important figure in the family."

"And we do background checks as well," Garcia added. "We feel that is very important for the kids' sake."

Sometimes, the mentor-youth relationships become very close. In one case, the mentor, who was a rancher, gave his mentee a newborn calf. Now whenever they met, they spend time caring for the calf.

In another mentoring case, the girl's mother died, and her mentor became not only a strong source of support, but ultimately became the girl's foster parent.

Mentors are required to spend at least three to five hours a month with their youngster, but most spend at least 12 hours a month, Briones said. Mentors are encouraged to do everyday things with the kids, such as camping, skiing, attending school

activities, going to work with them, or having them over for dinner.

"One of the most promising outcomes of the mentoring program has been an improvement in the dropout rate. More kids are staying in school and are saying they want to stay in school," Garcia points out. "The youngsters were saying they wanted to drop out before they were in the mentoring program, but now they are making plans to stay and finish high school."

The school curriculum component provides students with anti-substance abuse, anti-violence, and a comprehensive sexuality information program. These are available

throughout their public education. "Information in the elementary grades, which also includes nutrition information and conflict resolution, is integrated in other courses," Garcia states, "but the middle and high school students get classes and modules based specifically on these topics, as well as on body image, self-esteem, and peer relations."

"The curriculum has been chosen to give students as much hands-on activities and role-playing as possible," Garcia notes. This approach helps students learn more effectively. A Teen Health Teaching Module on violence, used in the high school, for example, has a role-playing component in which students can act out a "hot-head" and a "cool head" reaction to a cousin who has borrowed rollerblades without permission.

"We're also working with the Colorado Department of Education to see how we can integrate conflict resolution in the other classes," Garcia said.

The coalition has used the Colorado Youth Survey to measure how well the curriculum and the mentoring programs have worked in keeping kids away from substance use. So far, the results have been mixed. "Marijuana use among sixth and eighth graders is down, but tobacco use is up," Garcia observes. Alcohol and tobacco are not seen as risks, and that perception is something the coalition has identified as a concern it will need to address in the coming years.

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Center for Substance Abuse Prevention
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Decision Support System
www.preventiondss.org

Join Together
www.jointogether.org

Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America
www.cadca.org

For this community success story and others from across the Southwest region, visit our website at <http://www.swcapt.org/products/success.html>

